Subtext homework: Act 1

Act 1, scene 5, lines 36–52:

*“The raven himself is hoarse That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan Under my battlements. Come, you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood, Stop up th’access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between Th’ effect and it. Come to my woman’s breasts, And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, To cry ‘Hold, hold!’”*

Lady Macbeth says these words as she awaits the arrival of King Duncan at her castle. Unlike Lady Macbeth, Macbeth is hesitant about taking the crown by killing Duncan. Through this speech, it is apparent that Lady Macbeth is willing to do whatever is necessary to take away the throne. Not like her uncertain and hesitant husband, Lady Macbeth has a clear strength of purpose. The selected quotation shows the audience that Lady Macbeth is the force behind Macbeth. Her ambition will be strong enough to drive her husband forward. The language of this speech also suggests a theme of masculinity particularly when Lady Macbeth, in preparation for murder, says, “…unsex me here … Come to my woman’s breasts…and take my milk for gall.” Lady Macbeth is asking for her femininity to be taken so that she can perform the gruesome deeds necessary to seize the crown. The words “breast” and “milk” represent her womanhood and symbolize nurture like that of a caring mother. Being a woman, she is held back from doing cruel and violent things such as murder. These things, she associates with manliness. Her aim with this speech is to convince her husband to use his masculinity to do the required tasks to enable him to seize the crown.

Macbeth Act 1: Scene 7, Lines 1-28

*“Besides, this Duncan Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been So clear in his great office, that his virtues Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued, against The deep damnation of his taking-off; And pity, like a naked new-born babe, Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed Upon the sightless couriers of the air, Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur To prick the sides of my intent, but only Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, And falls on the other.”*

Found in Act 1, scene 7, lines 1–28, Macbeth debates to himself whether he should kill Duncan. He lists Duncan’s qualities and considers the loyalty that he feels toward him (the king), as he weighs the consequences. His true fear is revealed when he says, “Bloody instructions which, being taught, return To plague th’inventor.” As the line foreshadows his deeds coming back to haunt him, Macbeth reveals his worry about consequences to his actions. By comparing King Duncan's virtues to "angels," Shakespeare implies that Macbeth has no virtues, especially if he performs this act. The dark imagery in this speech suggests Macbeth’s awareness of how murdering would be both dark and sinful. More importantly he doubts his motive for killing the King: ambition. Murder based on aspiration has no real justification for the crime. Macbeth decides peoples’ actions on Earth are inescapable. He has the freedom too choose and if he chooses violent options they will come back to plague him. Macbeth realizes in hurting Duncan, he will be harming himself as well. As the soliloquy ends, Macbeth seems to decide not to kill King Duncan.